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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000434

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/21/2014
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SUBJECT: LEE JONG-SEOK HEARING OCCASIONS REHASH OF
"STRATEGIC FLEXIBILITY"

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: MOU-designate Lee Jong-seok's hearing at the National Assembly has served as a stage for renewed controversy over the recent U.S.-ROK agreement on strategic flexibility of U.S. Forces in Korea. The debate was sparked last week when a ruling party lawmaker disclosed classified records of internal debates that he claimed showed that the ROKG had failed to defend the national interest in its negotiations with Washington. A small minority in the Assembly have called for "re-negotiation" on strategic flexibility. Clearly flustered, the Blue House has refuted the allegations and has announced an investigation into how classified documents found their way into unauthorized hands. ROK officials continue to reassure us that the common understanding on strategic flexibility remains solid and that there is no confusion within the ROKG on the parameters of the agreement. The controversy over strategic flexibility is not likely to affect Lee Jong-seok's nomination. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) On February 1, Rep. Choi Jae-cheon of the ruling Uri Party revealed the classified minutes of a NSC meeting in which principals hashed out their respective positions on strategic flexibility of U.S. Forces in Korea. Those minutes recorded that FM Ban Ki-moon and other members of the NSC expressed support for the USG's position on the necessity of strategic flexibility in response to contingencies off the Peninsula. The next day, Choi brandished another classified Blue House document that Choi claimed proved that MOFAT had exchanged "s-e-c-r-e-t diplomatic notes" with the USG in October 2003 without reporting that fact to President Roh. (NOTE: The "s-e-c-r-e-t diplomatic notes" were in fact informal working-level documents exchanged during discussions between MOFAT and OSD/Embassy. END NOTE.) Choi went on to accuse the MOFAT and the NSC of routinely failing to defend the national interest and of deliberately keeping President Roh in the dark about how it was conducting U.S.-ROK relations.

3. (C) The Blue House appears to have been caught off-guard by these accusations, especially as they come from a member of the ruling party. In its initial reaction, the Blue House on February 2 expressed deep regret over Rep. Choi's disclosure of classified information. Then, President Roh issued an ambiguous statement the following day calling for the ROKG to "pay more attention to future negotiations over the new U.S. strategy, rather than engage in consumptive debate and defeatism." Roh added that "we can more flexibly reflect our positions in U.S. military realignments on the basis of mutual confidence and our negotiating power." On February 5, the Blue House issued another statement

specifically refuting Rep. Choi's charges, asserting that President Roh had in fact been fully informed of and engaged in the strategic flexibility issue from the beginning, and that there were no problems with the NSC's reporting procedures. The Blue House also announced that it had launched an internal investigation to identify who had leaked the classified documents to Rep. Choi. MOFAT has also protested Rep. Choi's characterization of its management of the ROKG response to the U.S. requirement for strategic flexibility.

¶4. (C) Lee Jong-seok, who until his nomination to be MOU was Deputy Secretary-General of the NSC (but for all intents and purposes controlled the organization), was grilled over this issue during his two-day hearings, which ended February 7. Lee defended the January 19 joint statement by observing that neither Washington nor Seoul had been able to retain its original position, i.e., the agreement reflects concessions from both sides. The opposition GNP for its part has attacked Lee from a different angle altogether, accusing him of favoring North-South engagement at the expense of the U.S.-ROK alliance. These familiar charges from the right, however, have largely been overtaken by the unusual and ironic accusation emanating from the far left: that Lee Jong-seok, and by extension the Roh Administration, places too much importance on the U.S.-ROK alliance and has given in to Washington too easily.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: As Lee Jong-seok's hearing before the Assembly's Unification, Foreign Affairs and Trade Committee winds down February 7, there is no indication that the controversy over strategic flexibility will affect his ability to assume his new portfolio as Minister of Unification. As for the debate over strategic flexibility, the ROKG appears to have been caught flat-footed and fumbled its initial response to disclosure of classified materials. The ROKG has assured us in the strongest terms that the common understanding on strategic flexibility remains solid and that there is no confusion within the ROKG on the parameters of the agreement. Although the titillating manner in which details of the negotiations have been revealed has renewed public interest, analysts predict that, with Lee's hearing over, the issue is likely to fade as public attention shifts in the next day to what promises to be a contentious hearing for Rhyu Si-min, the president's controversial nominee for Minister of Health and Welfare.

¶6. (C) COMMENT CONT'D: Still, attacks from the left against Lee Jong-seok are a significant new development. We understand that these criticisms are being led by young Blue House staffers of the so-called "386" generation who believe that Lee has failed to uphold the principal of "self-determination" and "independence" in ROK foreign policy. These criticisms led directly to Lee's failure to place his own people in key NSC positions, including Lee Soo-hyuck as NSA and Suh Chu-seok as Deputy NSA, according to our Blue House contacts. END COMMENT.
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